

Take It from the Masters

Elise Ansel Re-Reads and Reinterprets the Past at Danese/Corey

By Alfred Mac Adam, Posted 03/09/17 11:14 AM



Elise Ansel, *First Stone II*, 2016, oil on linen, 60 x 72 inches.
Photo: Luc Demers/Courtesy Danese/Corey, New York

Elise Ansel's stunning show goes to the heart of the relationship between artists practicing today and those of the past. Ansel investigates the "dialogues" her paintings establish with the great masters and gives new life to a tradition that extends back to Miró's 1928 deconstructions of Dutch interiors and ahead to contemporary artists like Mike Bidlo with his facsimile "not-bys."

In this way, the modern-day artist begins as a spectator, viewing art, assimilating it, and translating it. The aesthetics of copying, appropriating, and parodying are all in play, and Ansel moves this practice further along in the directions adumbrated in Danese/Corey's recent "Ref-er-enced show, which gathered together many artists, including Ansel, involved in re-reading the past.

To appreciate Ansel's project we should consider her *First Stone II* (2016), a large (60-by-72-inch) painting that approximates the size of the painting from which it departs, [Titian's Christ and the Adulteress \(1508–10\)](#), about 54 by 71 inches. We can identify three moments in the gestation of Ansel's version: first, her contemplation of the original in one form or another (in person, in a book, or on a computer); second, her analysis of the painting into the shapes and color juxtapositions dictated to her by her perception; and third, the re-composition of her perception into the painting we see.

First, what vestiges remain of Titian? Many: the vertical swaths on the left allude to the legs of the man on the left in Titian; then the blue swath that would be Christ, then more verticals on the right taking us back to the legs on Titian's right, and, finally, the white, in the adulteress's costume. But where Titian's adulteress has horizontal red bands or stripes on her bodice, Ansel renders them as verticals (echoes of the legs), and in doing so inscribes something new: a scrawled A. Is she inscribing her own initial, or is she alluding to Nathaniel Hawthorne's romance *The Scarlet Letter*? This would swerve the message in Titian's version—clemency and forgiveness—toward Puritanical irrevocable sin and guilt.



Elise Ansel, *Venus and Adonis*, 2016, oil on linen, 60 x 72 inches.
Photo: Luc Demers/Courtesy Danese/Corey, New York

Ansel's revision of Veronese's 1580 *Venus and Adonis* severely edits the original, virtually expunging references to Venus and Eros while reducing Adonis to an orange smudge. This reduction may also carry literary connotations, since Veronese's source, Ovid, makes no reference to Eros and presents Venus dressed as a huntress and not as a half-naked love goddess. But the gestalt remains: Veronese's triangular arrangement of the dramatis personae reappears in Ansel's massing of colors. But again, as with the Titian, we wonder if there is more to Ansel's selection of pictorial points of departure than color and painterly structure.

Elise Ansel's dazzling paintings stand on their own two feet, express their own passions, and leave us in a poignant mood. The beauty of her color and structural harmony mask the anguished labor involved in creating these wonderful works.